

LINCOLN

THE MARVELOUS MAN

SPEECH

OF

HON. WILLIAM R. GREEN

OF IOWA

IN THE

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Mr. GREEN of Iowa. Mr. Speaker, it would be difficult, if not impossible, at this time to present any new facts with reference to the great man whose birth we this day commemorate; but I have indulged the hope that I may present certain features of his career to some extent in a new light. My theme is:

LINCOLN—THE MARVELOUS MAN.

Long years have passed since organized government first came into existence. Since then, in the procession of the centuries, kings and queens, potentates and presidents, statesmen and heroes, have marched down the aisle of time. What a gorgeous panorama it makes. We can picture how the banners waved, how the cheers resounded, what noble figures appeared. The pages of history glow with accounts of the great deeds of warriors and generals. Volume after volume has been written of the exploits of Alexander, of Cæsar, Frederick the Great, and Napoleon. Until the middle of the nineteenth century had passed no man who had not commanded an army in battle could be said to have changed the destiny of any important nation or left an enduring world-wide fame. The world worshipped a conqueror. The blood-stained trail of wreck, ruin, and misery that they left behind them did not seem to dim their glory or to lessen the admiration in which they were held. Cold, selfish, and cruel as most of them were, it seemed to be considered that

great men were not to be bound by the rules that applied to the masses, that greatness was inconsistent with the gentler virtues, and mankind could only be controlled by an iron hand guided by a relentless brain.

But the world fortunately for its people has come to see a new light. The dawn of freedom was breaking when our Nation was born and our Constitution adopted. The full day was not to come until more than half a century later, and after the bloody tide of a civil war had swept away the last vestige of slavery. In the new light there arose the figure of a civilian, without high ancestry, without military glory, born of the common people, and rightfully claimed as their own.

How was it that a man who never won a battle should have so eclipsed the deeds of these warriors and conquerors? How was it that his name became a household word in earth's farthest zones? How was it that he was able to recreate a Nation that seemed ready to dissolve into warring fragments, and build of antagonistic forces a State that has become not only the most powerful but the most prosperous the world has ever known? How was it that an awkward, ungainly boy brought up on the frontiers, uneducated, with no friends other than those he made himself, became the most renowned statesman of his time? Was he also a conqueror? I answer, "Yes," and that his victories were greater than theirs because his were won against greater odds and he was matched against more formidable opponents.

If, as I believe, a man's greatness is to be measured in a large part by the obstacles he has overcome, then we can say none had more to meet than Lincoln. His early life was a contest, his last years a desperate struggle against adverse circumstances. His end a triumph over all.

Born in so wretched a cabin that it barely furnished roof and sides, he saw little but toil and hardship in his early life; but poverty and lack of schools could not prevent his obtaining an education. With the aid of his mother he learned to read by the flickering firelight of the hearth or the blaze of a bunch of twigs. Nothing was more difficult in the frontier community in which his boyhood days were passed than to obtain a book

or an opportunity to read and study. He had, however, the Bible and Shakespeare, and in some way he found others. Somehow he managed to find time to read and study them, although the day's work lasted, as a rule, from dawn until dark. When opportunity afforded he practiced speaking on his companions, and very early became a fluent and ready speaker on all occasions. With a few but great books at his command he acquired a style, limpid in its clearness, which was all his own.

Although you have all heard it before, listen again to this letter written to a mother :

DEAR MADAM : I have been shown in the files of the War Department a statement of the adjutant general of Massachusetts that you are the mother of five sons who died gloriously on the field of battle. I feel how weak and fruitless must be any words of mine which should attempt to beguile you from a loss so overwhelming, but I can not refrain from tendering you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of a Republic that they died to save. I pray that our heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and the lost and the solemn pride in having laid so costly a sacrifice on the altar of freedom.

Yours, very sincerely and respectfully,

A. LINCOLN.

Is it any wonder that in classic Oxford College, of old England, this was pronounced the finest example of pure English that has even been written. It shows better than any words of mine could explain the remarkable faculty Lincoln had for making a moving appeal to the people. Speaking or writing, with the hand of a master he touched their very heartstrings and attuned their minds in accord with his own. Further on I shall undertake to show how much this contributed to his winning and holding their confidence and support.

It is easy to see why the world has loved him. The common people knew well that he was one of them not only when he wielded the ax as a rail splitter, but as well in the stately mansion which the people of this country had provided for their Chief Magistrate. He rose from the position of common laborer to the Presidency of one of the greatest and most powerful nations of the world. Yet at the summit of his power and fame he looked down on no one. The humblest of the humble he met as an equal. He not only never forgot that he was one of the common people, but he always remained one of them, and they in turn never forgot him. "God," he said, "must have loved the common people for he made so many of them."

The people knew that he had experienced all which the poorest among them had to contend against. He knew them because he knew what they had suffered and endured. They felt, and rightfully felt, that they understood him and he understood them. No man was ever at the head of this Government who could so clearly read the minds of the people as Lincoln. No one ever spoke to them whom they were so ready to follow, because they regarded him as both a friend and guide.

The hardships and privations which he endured have also been undergone by many successful men, but none have so completely triumphed over them. Some under such circumstances have become harsh and embittered, others self-willed and unyielding, and most imperious, selfish, or dictatorial. The ordeal not only left Lincoln unscathed, but a kindlier, sweeter nature than his never breathed. All through his life his great joy was in doing some kindness to another, especially to the poor, the friendless, and the helpless. His mind was utterly devoid of rancor. His whole record may be searched without finding he ever uttered or wrote a malicious word. Truly he could say, as he once said, that he had never willingly planted a thorn in any man's bosom. Hatred he would not cherish, even though it was well deserved. Indeed, his most serious faults and errors arose because he was unwilling to believe evil in others and because he always looked upon misconduct with leniency. The world has long ago forgotten and now does not want to hear of any mistakes in his public life that arose from this cause. It cares not that he appointed some unworthy men and that graft and greed sometimes went unpunished or, at least, unchecked during his administration. But all of us love to dwell on his kindness to his mother, his thoughtfulness for his friends, and how, in the midst of the burdens of state, he found time to go and sit beside a dying soldier, holding his hand, comforting and steadying him as he passed into the Great Beyond.

The long death roll of the battles which he urged his generals to fight saddened him inexpressibly. The disasters to the Union armies which at one time made their cause seem lost pressed upon him as a crushing burden. Yet he would rise

in the middle of the night to pardon some boy soldier who incurred the death penalty by sleeping at his post. All through the war he was surrounded by men who talked bitterly of revenge upon the enemy, of hanging and shooting the leaders of the Confederacy, but in his mind there was never a thought of vengeance, much less a feeling of hatred against them. His first thought when war closed was to bind the wounds of the conflict and heal the animosities which it had created. I know of no other man who after taking a leading part in a long and deadly conflict that ended in the utter defeat and surrender of the other side ever succeeded in gaining the affections of friend and foe alike.

His mind was too broad to cherish resentment even against those who had intentionally done him an injury, and when the public service was involved he never gave their action a thought. Stanton had, as Lincoln himself said, treated him most brutally. The future Secretary of War in an important lawsuit had contemptuously ignored him and deprived him of the privilege of an associate counsel. Yet he made Stanton a member of his Cabinet when the country needed a man of energy, ability, and firmness in that position. Chase plotted against him in the Cabinet and out, hoping to displace him as President, but he gave Chase the highest honor in his power in the office of Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. So also when Greeley in his newspaper severely criticized him, first for not pressing the war with sufficient energy and then later for not making peace, he referred to him in writing a letter as "an old friend whose heart was right."

Long before he was known nationally Lincoln had entered politics and early in life became a prominent political leader in his own State. Indeed, it would have been difficult for him to have kept out of politics if he had tried. In a local way he soon accumulated enthusiastic friends and faithful followers. His pleasing manner, the strength of his character, his absolute rectitude, his powers as a stump speaker made it unnecessary that he should seek office. Opportunities to be a candidate were thrust upon him. But he wished to be a leader, not merely a follower, and his ambition, for he was ambitious, looked beyond

the boundaries of his own State. His opportunity came in his contest with Douglas for the Senatorship, and it was to apply to him a crucial test.

Success in this contest would have made him easily the leader of his party in his State, and as Douglas was already one of the most prominent of our public men, a victory must have seemed to Lincoln like a stepping-stone to the Presidency. Yet he must have known before his friends told him, and they did not hesitate to tell him, that the course he was taking would lead to his defeat.

Douglas, if elected Senator, was certain to be a presidential candidate. Much credit has been given Lincoln for the shrewdness of a question which he propounded to Douglas in the debates which ensued. The question was a shrewd one, indeed. It obliged Douglas to take a position, while it would win for him the Senatorship, Lincoln's farseeing judgment foretold would lose his opponent the Presidency. Great honor, and deserved honor, has been given Lincoln for surrendering his chances for the senatorship, but there was far more to the situation than this. It seems not to have been observed that he was also giving up his hopes, and probably ruining his opportunity, to be a presidential candidate. The expected answer would defeat Lincoln in the senatorial contest, and defeated candidates seldom come back with success. In the ordinary course of events his prestige would be injured, his following discouraged, his organization broken. What hope could there be under the circumstances that he would be selected to lead his party to victory? In truth there was none. Nothing but a most unexpected turn in fortune's wheel led to his subsequent nomination for President. Lincoln deliberately waved aside the glittering prize of the Presidency for the sake of the cause to which he had devoted himself.

As we look back and survey his position and its surroundings we see how natural it would have been to say that he had already done enough, and how easy it would have been to persuade himself that he could do more for his party and the cause as a victorious Senator than as a defeated candidate. In attacking slavery he was striking at an institution that had its

roots firmly embedded in the Constitution itself. He had to contend not only against the power of its natural supporters but against the fears of those who dreaded a conflict and expected that the contest would end in an unsuccessful war, with the country split into antagonistic parts whose hatred for each other would never cease. Others of no mean ability had given up the struggle in despair and hoped at best only for a peaceful separation. I do not say that this was the turning point in Lincoln's career, for this marvelous man never turned. Always and ever, with unfaltering step, his feet trod the narrow and straight path of duty. For the sake of the ultimate triumph of his cause, he was ready at all times to efface himself. "Think not of me," he said in one of his speeches; "think not of the political fortunes of any man." Noble words that came from the heart. Few men could have said them sincerely, but in all of the many accusations that were made against him even in the trying days of the war, no one ever said that he was insincere, dishonest, or tricky, and no one would have believed it if it had been said.

No element contributed more to Lincoln's early rise than his capacity as a public speaker. His ability in this respect was recognized, but probably there were few people who heard him speak that thought of him as an orator. Yet, he was incomparably the greatest orator of his day and one of the greatest of all time. The so-called lost speech and the famous Gettysburg oration show this. The first was made at an early political convention in Illinois and not reported, except by the memory of a hearer. Its very existence was unknown to all but a few, but it made a profound impression on those who heard it. The style of his speeches seemed so easy and natural that the audiences did not comprehend the heights to which he had risen nor how far he had carried them.

Lincoln had no use for the tricks of oratory or the mouthings of an actor. What he sought was not a fine delivery or harmonious diction, but above all the clear expression of sound thought. He did not, we must admit, possess the fiery eloquence of Demosthenes, the lofty declamation of Cicero, the impassioned fervor of Pitt, or the noble dignity in appearance and

words alike that characterized Webster. But in a simplicity that was at once virile and beautiful, and a logic that was irresistible, he was the superior of them all. He never used big words, unlike most of us who are unable to express ourselves without them. He sought to carry conviction to his audience rather than to obtain admiration for himself, and thus while all the effect of oratory was obtained the audience neither heard nor saw its accompaniments.

His Gettysburg speech was delivered to an audience that had just listened to Edward Everett. Everett was one of the most prominent orators of the country, and had been selected as the principal speaker of the occasion. His address was correct in form and beautifully phrased, so the chronicles state, but compared with that of Lincoln it was like some polished statue of marble, which moves not and is cold and lifeless to the touch, while Lincoln's was the living, breathing oracle, whose words though plain and simple expressed thoughts so high and noble that the world will never let them die. Who reads or remembers now a word that Everett spoke? Who that has heard can ever forget what Lincoln said? [Applause.]

Lincoln had one habit which, so far as I can learn, no other man occupying a similar place possessed. As a rule men in public life avoid, so far as possible, expressing in writing their opinions on questions of state, accompanied by their reasons for their position. With some this is because of timidity and irresolution, with others because they fear lest the writing may not accurately state their views; but Lincoln was ready on all occasions to state in black and white his policy on any question, giving his reasons, and leave it to his critics to answer them. In almost any other man this would have been fatal, but when Lincoln stated a proposition it was unanswerable. At times when he was meeting with the most trying opposition he would record his views in memoranda that he left behind him. Thus he appealed from the hasty opinion of his contemporaries to the sober judgment of posterity. It is sufficient to say that time has justified him.

No mere orator, however great, could have saved the country from dissolution. It was almost an accomplished fact when

Lincoln was inaugurated as President. His task was not merely to prevent the States from dividing. The Nation had already fallen apart. Before him over all the Southland floated the banners of organized revolt. Behind him in the North the States were full of open sympathizers with those who defied the Government, and some of these sympathizers were scarcely less defiant than those in actual revolt. Discord filled the North with its clamor. Some wanted to negotiate. Others, like Greeley, thought the rift between the States could never be closed, and would have bid the seceding States to go in peace. The strongest knew not what to do, and the weaker feared to do anything, but the genius of the statesman rose above the wavering counsel and the faltering courage of his advisors. He saw that the rallying cry must be the Union and the Constitution; that a government that could not control its forts and arsenals wherever they were located could not command respect, and when once its flag was raised, if it was then fired upon, thousands would rush to its support. The story of the attack on Fort Sumter and the rising of the North that followed vindicated his judgment.

We are accustomed, as we look back upon those trying days, to view his career as if he had possessed from the beginning of his administration the unquestioned leadership that he had acquired at his death. Had he possessed it his task would have been most difficult, his burdens too heavy for the shoulders of any ordinary man. Unfortunately, he did not possess it. On the contrary, during his lifetime his creative genius and power of command were little realized. The fulsome praise which many of our Presidents have received during their administrations, from the press, in legislative halls, and on the platform, was unknown to him. Even among those who were aligned with him, many high in education, culture, and position, could see only his awkward form and hear only the humorous stories with which he pointed a moral or clinched an argument. To them he seemed to have the mind of a jester and the methods of a minor politician. They could understand why he was popular with the masses, but they thought he had only touched the hearts of the people, and could not believe that he had molded

their minds. They knew that he had in his Cabinet and around him men of great force and ability. Whatever success had been obtained, they thought was due to these men. Whatever failure had resulted, they considered was owing to his rejection of their counsel. In short, they believed that these men controlled Lincoln. The real truth was, as we now know, that he controlled them.

Chittenden, at one time his private secretary, kept a diary, and subsequently wrote "Memories" of the great leader whom he served. In them he records: "Had I known at the time how great a man Lincoln was I could have written far more details about him than I did." This gives us the common view of that time. The qualities which so endeared him to the people were easy to be seen, but there were many around him that refused to acknowledge that he was anything beyond the ordinary. I do not need to say to the Members of this House whom I am now addressing that the most insidious method of injuring a public man and perhaps the hardest attack to meet is that of belittling him. At the time Lincoln was first elected he was literally "damned with faint praise." He was honest, the public press said, and well-intentioned, but the implication was that he was nothing more.

Among those who at first failed to see the latent powers of the man were members of his own Cabinet. Seward, Chase, and Stanton have left behind in their notes and letters evidences that each had come into the Cabinet with the idea that he was to be the controlling force and that through him alone the country was to be saved. Indeed, no distracted country in its hour of peril had so many self-constituted saviors. The spirit even reached some prominent generals, who were subsequently retired for incompetency or failure. One of them insolently wrote Lincoln that he had done his best to destroy the Army which that general commanded and another declared that what the country needed was a dictator instead of a weak man. The general evidently considered that he should be the dictator and he plainly meant that the President was a weak man. But I do not wish to belittle Seward, Chase, or Stanton. They were all strong, masterful men. They had been accustomed to lead

and direct and not to follow. In another time they might have been called great, and it is only fair to say that each rendered great service to the country. Their services ought not to be forgotten because they are now overshadowed by the marvelous man who stood above them. But it is a blot upon their record, and especially upon that of Chase, that they seemed to give encouragement to the numerous legion of those in the North who sought to thwart the purposes of Lincoln.

No President was ever so reviled. He was denounced as a tyrant and even ridiculed as an imbecile. He was beset with impossible demands and threatened with dire consequences if he refused to grant them. His picture was torn down and stamped upon. His figure was hung in effigy. Caricature and lampoon alike were exhausted to defame him. He met the storm of assault and criticism as some granite cliff resists the ceaseless beating of the ocean waves and never swerved from his course. If all of these assaults had been made only by those who had from the first opposed his election and his administration, and he had met with the support that he had a right to expect, we could understand how he could bear up against them, but as we look back upon the scene we are utterly bewildered to find that so large a portion of the obstacles that were spread in his path he met in the house of those who ranked as his friends. The members of his Cabinet not only quarreled among themselves but would have quarreled with him had it been possible for a man to have done so. Again and again Seward and Chase tendered their resignations, and over and over Stanton threatened to resign. Even prominent Senators of his own party, like Henry Winter Davis and Wade, did not hesitate to join those who, like curs, snapped at his heels. Because Lincoln did not approve a plan of reconstruction which they advocated and which he thought—and everyone now agrees rightly thought—was unconstitutional, they issued a manifesto in which he was charged with perverting the Constitution, accused of usurping powers that did not belong to him, censured and ridiculed for the reasons he gave, and which even insinuated that he was actuated by the lowest personal motives. Later, after his renomination, Wade actually instigated a move-

ment to force him to withdraw from the ticket and in this action seems to have had the support of Sumner. Finally, as the campaign for his reelection began, a number of the so-called radical element of the North drew apart and nominated Gen. Fremont for President with the avowed purpose of defeating Lincoln in the election.

When attacked by men like Davis and Wade and abandoned by men like Sumner, with the members of his own Cabinet ready to desert him, and lifelong and faithful friends like Swett giving up in despair, it is not strange that about three months before the election Lincoln himself lost hope and in a memorandum wrote: "It seems exceedingly probable that this administration will not be elected." But even he, for once, had misjudged the people. They had unlimited confidence in his rugged honesty, and his wonderful power of clear expression carried to them his real purpose through all this storm cloud of defamation. His unerring instinct or genius, whichever it may be called, had pointed out the true course which must be followed. It seemed impossible for any man to successfully resist these attacks and unite all these discordant elements, yet Lincoln did, and finally was unanimously nominated and overwhelmingly reelected.

Then, too, he had another remarkable quality. Consistency is perhaps not the brightest jewel in a statesman's crown. It is better to change when wrong than to be forever in error, but it is better, far better, that a leader should be right in the first instance than that he should be compelled to reverse himself and be dragged back into the proper course by the logic of events. Even in the dark days of the war, when for months and months and year after year a single false step meant ruin, this marvelous man never varied his policy, never changed a principle, never misjudged the needs of the hour, never so much as thought of shaping his course for his own political interests. [Applause.]

At last the end came. The roar of battle died away. The last shot between the combatants was fired—the last we trust and fervently pray that will ever be fired in fratricidal strife. [Applause.] But not for him. He was permitted only to see the

accomplishment of his great desire and not the full fruition of his hopes. He died at the moment of his triumph, when every obstacle had been overcome, when every doubter and detractor had been forever silenced, and only cheers and rejoicings greeted his ears. The Nation wept with a sorrow indescribable, but even then did not know fully what it had lost. For this was needed the opening of secret archives and a calm study of his life in the unfailing light of history. At the expiration of more than half a century since he departed we can justly appraise the wonderful sagacity, the enduring strength, and the marvelous intellect of this orator, seer, and statesman who preserved this country from dissolution to occupy its present proud position as leader of the nations of the world. Truly may we say that he was one of the few who turned the tides of time.

After the assassin's bullet had struck him down, as the last glimmer of life flickered and went out, Stanton, standing by his side said, "Now he belongs to the ages." Yes, forever, to the eternal ages; for though dead he yet speaketh—to give the worker hope, the statesman courage, and the patriot fortitude, from the great soul of a lover of all mankind. [Prolonged applause.]

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